

# The Pink Room

*"It is with circus-going as it is with Sin. One sin is always followed by a long procession of others. He who goes to the Circus is Lost Forever."*

—Free Press & Times,  
Burlington, Vermont, July 27, 1883

We were standing on a hilltop in the village of Ludlow, near the border of England and Wales. Far below was a circus tent, comfortably sprouted in the cozy valley like a colorful mushroom. "There she is," I said, in as unaffected a manner as I could muster.

My traveling companion, John B., nervously shifted his stance and glanced from me to the big top below. He knew I had packed baggy pants, big shoes, and a red rubber nose in my bag. He distinctly heard me say I would follow the wind right to this moment. "Gonna run off to join a circus," I had said months earlier. But when he decided to join me in my travels in the summer of 1969, he was totally unprepared for coming face to face with a circus.

John was from Ontario, Canada. We were acquaintances in college. At eighteen, he was a year younger and handsome in a Robert Redford way, more fleshed out than my long Buster Keaton face and lean frame. He was the son of a diplomat, with genteel manners, a reserved and polished bearing, and a willing amiability and youthful inexperience that lent him a certain charm. Back at school when I compared his conservative style to my vagabond impulses, I wondered how fate might grin at such a pair.

We needed to discuss a few things.

I recounted the contents of my money pouch and then presented to John a few ideas for our travel arrangements and budgeting procedures. I endorsed the virtues of frugal travel and encouraged the attitude of vagabonding, concluding that, for the sake of adventure if nothing else, we should endeavor to seek employment while on the road and not hesitate to offer our services for nightly lodging.

"Fine," he commented, "that's all well and good, but I don't think it's quite necessary to overdo it, now. It's a vacation, after all, and..."

"Vacation? We're not signing up for some tour group, now are we?"

"No, but still, I don't see..."

"Well, that's just it—you don't see. We're on a quest. We've got to do it right, with proper style. We'll hit the open road and follow the wind wherever it blows us. We'll let our wits keep pace with destiny's path. We'll..." I stopped waving my arms, seeing how my grandiloquence was wasted.

"Right," said he. "We'll get a Eurail Pass. They're fairly cheap, I hear."

"What! We can't do that, John!"

"Can too. Easy enough, Rob."

"But so can anybody!"

"So can we."

"Well, come on, John," I said. "What's the use of going to foreign shores if we go the way everyone goes? How would it read in a book? '...And they went to the ticket office to seek their fortune, and bought a Eurail Pass, second class.'" I looked at him. "Well?"

"Sounds okay to me," he said, shrugging his shoulders.

"Anyway, after the airfare I've only got \$50 to last the whole summer."

John stopped what he was doing and regarded me for a moment. "That's the first straightforward thing you've said. So tell me, how do you propose we travel around?"

"Well," I answered slowly, "once we catch up with the circus, travel and expenses will be taken care of, I imagine."

Pause.

"What circus?" he asked, warily.

"Why, the one we're looking for."

There was another pause. We had begun having two separate conversations.

"Why..." he asked carefully, "are we looking for a circus?"

"Because that's the reason for this trip in the first place." He knew I wanted to work in a European circus someday, and experience that lifestyle.

Silence.

"Tell me, where do we find this circus of yours?"

I bit my lip, upset with myself for once again getting into this conversation. None of my friends or family took my quest seriously. Always in my young life I had to make a conscious decision to either be a quiet observer, which was the more familiar and comfortable part of my nature, or to engage in something greater than myself, which required a concerted effort. I took adventuring as a necessary but private activity. I was not used to the compromises a companion required.

I tried to be tactful and pretended to back off. "John. I don't know where it is yet; that's why we're going over to look for it." He looked very dubious. "Don't worry, these things have a way of taking care of themselves. We just need to take the first step, with good faith."

There was a long pause while John thought the matter over. He obviously concluded that first of all, I was impossible to argue with and secondly, this whole business about a circus was irrelevant since there was really no chance we would ever encounter one.

"Okay." He smiled, and we shook hands. "Let's just go and enjoy ourselves and see what happens."

So far in my life, it had been natural for me to go adventuring on my own, without the hindrance of discussion or debate with another person. At moments of "crossroad decisions", I tend to shift into philosophic mode: what's the greater metaphor here, is there a symbolic handle to hang on to?

I looked at John, packing his new clothes, wearing a nice cardigan pullover sweater over a white button-down collar shirt, brown loafers and white socks, his carefully combed hair. I looked at my old, worn-out canvas duffel bag packed with dirty sneakers, denim shirt and faded jeans. We were two sides of society, maybe really two sides of myself.

John represented the careful, no inordinate risk, well planned out, conventional worldview. My intention to find a circus represented an instinct that said there was another way to experience life, a belief we could hit the road without a detailed map, set out in good faith, react spontaneously to circumstances, and be inspired by a daydream.

To paraphrase, dictionary.com says it best: an adventure is an undertaking of uncertain outcome and involving risks. It doesn't require any special courage; it is more a presence of mind, being ready to step out of the conventional at any time. And it's keeping your wits about you when inevitably confronted with the unexpected. It would be interesting to see how John and I would each handle whatever came our way. I would learn just from observing how fate dealt our hands and how we played them.

For moral support I thought of Tom Sawyer. By gosh, I reckoned, no question as to his opinion in the matter—for him style was everything. And Huckleberry Finn was ready for any adventure the river floated his way. Robert Louis Stevenson's David Balfour was my age when his adventures began as "he closed the door on his father's house for the last time" and was Kidnapped. Nearly out of my teens, there was just time enough left for gathering stories of my youth to tell in old age.

In his old age, Hans Christian Andersen remarked wistfully, "I wish I were twenty again; then I'd take my inkpot on my back, two shirts and a pair of socks, put a quill at my side and go into the wide world."

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John B. and I had first arrived in London and immediately set out on the road, thumbs out, heading north. As fate would have it, our first ride took

us way up into the lush Shropshire countryside. Our gracious hosts insisted we stay the night at their impressive estate outside Wolverhampton.

I mentioned we were looking for a circus if they knew of any in the area. They were mildly amused.

We were given separate bedrooms. John B. in the Blue Room, my lot fell to the Pink Room, its plush carpet a cotton candy pink. The bathroom faucets had pink marble knobs and embroidered frilly pink lace topped the luxurious pale pink canopy bed—the whole room smelled pink. I dreamt that night of pink elephants.

The next morning, we were served a sumptuous English country breakfast of eggs, bangers and mash (sausage with mashed potatoes), toast, and fruit cocktail. We had it made! Before hitting the road again, we asked our hosts if there was anything we could do to repay their kindness. Oh, yes, was the reply.

After we spent the day tending the grounds—clipping hedges, raking around the duck pond—we were encouraged to stay on as caretakers. A perfect invitation! It was easy security for a couple of loose lads, and the appealing young maid added to the attraction. In short, it was an offer I knew we would dare not accept.

That night John and I had a conversation that went like this:

John, lounging on his blue canopy bed: "We could stay, maybe for a fortnight at the very least, until we get restless..."

"We could," I said.

John, hands behind his head, staring at the blue ceiling painted with faint blue clouds: "The food is quite marvelous, wouldn't you agree? Where would we ever find equivalent accommodations on the road?"

"We wouldn't," I replied.

"We could even stay half the summer, perhaps. It sure would be a good break from traveling," he said, sighing, ignoring that we had been on the road barely one day.

I grunted a response.

John turned to look at me, earnest: "You know, this Fate of yours may have dropped us here for a very good reason. Did you see that pretty maid smile at me? Perhaps we should stay the whole darn—"

"—What!? A whole summer in the Pink Room? Sorry, partner, I'm outta here."

We decided to wait for some kind of sign. It came on the third day when our wonderful hosts took us to a Shakespeare festival in nearby Ludlow. We watched "Romeo and Juliet" performed outdoors that night in the hilltop ruins of Ludlow Castle, silhouetted by a full moon. After the performance we walked around the castle in a romantic reverie, basking in the blissful comfort of the warm summer night. In the moon shadow of the castle ruins, we looked down on the valley below and saw a sight that made me smile. It was a circus tent, sleeping in the field way down in the valley, like a turtle in the midst of a cluster of tiny toy trucks.

"There she is," I said. I smiled and looked at John, who stared in dismay.

It was only fitting to find the circus that night. It was a perfect piece of stage direction: Shakespeare up on the hill, playing for the romantics under open heavens, and the circus, down in the valley, playing for the masses, planted firmly in the earth—or mud, as we were to find out soon enough.